



PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Thursday, 15 March 2007

Empower Orang Asli To Alleviate Poverty and Safeguard Forests: EC and UNDP

Kuala Lumpur, 15 March 2007 – The forest dependent indigenous people of Malaysia need to be empowered to alleviate poverty and to safeguard the surrounding forests, said the European Commission (EC) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The EC and UNDP said that a policy approach that is fully participatory and recognizant of native customary rights allows the communities to be engaged in activities that determine their future and address the problems they face.

“Once effective recognition is given to their customary rights, they are the ones who know best which are the needs and specific challenges to tackle, in order to ensure improved and sustainable living conditions, that will also protect forests and its biodiversity,” said His Excellency Mr Thierry Rommel, Ambassador and Head of the EC Delegation to Malaysia.

According to Ambassador Rommel, the social and environmental values of the forest have been increasingly recognized as critical elements of Malaysia’s poverty eradication strategy and definition of sustainable forestry and biodiversity management.

“Local communities are no obstacle to growth. Rather, they can help ensure growth is sustainable while natural resources are protected. But they do need effective protection of their native customary rights,” Ambassador Rommel said in his opening statement during an EC-UNDP event “Creating a Sustainable Future for Rural Indigenous Communities of Malaysia”.

The event showcased the achievements of various forest dependent indigenous communities who had received grants for poverty alleviation and forest protection in an EC-UNDP small grants programme.

The programme, called the ‘Small Grants Programme for Operations to Promote Tropical Forests’ (SGP PTF), has given 20 micro-grants worth a total of about RM5.9 million to local forest-based communities since 2004 and has been implemented by the UNDP office in Malaysia.

The 20 communities who received the SGP PTF grants have planned, designed and implemented activities to improve their socio-economic conditions, while conserving the surrounding forest areas that provide for valuable resources.

These activities, which are unique to each project, include eco-tourism, agro-forestry, reforestation and others, as well as various initiatives to revitalize and document indigenous and traditional culture and knowledge.

The communities have also been able to share experiences and lessons among themselves through networking activities.

SGP PTF, which is governed by a national steering committee formed by representatives from the EC, UNDP, government, non-governmental organizations and private sector, has also enjoyed support from local celebrities Joanna Bessey, Na'a Murad, Reshmonu and Zahim Albakri.

"The SGP PTF experience demonstrates the importance of a participatory approach to ensure a successful implementation of their activities and their sustainability," Ambassador Rommel said.

Thanks to the support received, many of the communities are now managing their own activities and have prepared for the second phases of their projects in anticipation of SGP PTF's closure in June 2007, Rommel added.

Based on SGP PTF's success, the European Commission and UNDP hope that these projects can be sustained and their models replicated, to provide policy guidance and to build upon the successful foundation that has been established presently.

"In spite of their strong commitment and their efforts, the indigenous communities are not capable of investing on the required scale because they are not economically strong," he said.

While Malaysia has made great strides in poverty reduction since independence, pockets of poverty still exist in Malaysian society, particularly among the poor population living on the margins of the forests of Sabah and Sarawak, said Resident Representative of UNDP Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam Dr Richard Leete

"SGP PTF is very specifically designed to target these pockets of poverty," said Leete.

Ambassador Rommel and Dr Leete appealed to all levels of society, including the government, private sector and individuals to demonstrate solidarity and care by helping to create a legally secure and sustainable future for the indigenous communities, many of which are still confronted with economic marginalization and sometimes appalling living conditions.

Looking towards the future, interested donors may choose to commit a fixed percentage to the new programme over the next two years, or adopt certain or a cluster of projects.

NOTE TO EDITOR

The European Union (EU) comprises twenty seven European countries committed to work and act together towards ever increasing integration in many different fields, such as economics, common foreign and security policy, justice and home affairs, social policy, environment, and more generally in all areas where joint action is deemed more efficient than individual national actions. The European Commission is the EU's executive branch.

UNDP is the UN's global development network, advocating for change and connecting countries to knowledge, experience and resources to help people build a better life. We are on the ground in 166 countries, working with them on their own solutions to global and national development challenges. As they develop local capacity, they draw on the people of UNDP and our wide range of partners. Its current priority is to help all countries achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015.

To read more about the work of UNDP in Malaysia, please visit our website at www.undp.org.my

For a complete list of SGP PTF projects in Malaysia, visit http://www.sgptf.org/projects_list.asp?Country=Malaysia

For further information, please contact:
Shom Teoh, Communications Officer,
Energy and Environment Cluster
UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME
Wisma UN, Block C, Kompleks Pejabat Damansara,
Jln Dungun, Damansara Heights, 50490 KL
Tel No. 603 2091 5104 Fax : +60 3 2095 2870
Email : shom.teoh@undp.org

Telephone: (603) 2091 5104, **Mobile No.:** (6012)5159048, **Email:** shom.teoh@undp.org